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SHORT REPORT

Nine Ways Parents Can Support Their Gender Diverse Children

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Abstract

Parental support is associated with improved mental health outcomes for gender diverse youth (GDY). Parents often seek guidance from pediatric providers, but few studies explore what actions make GDY feel supported. Using a qualitative analysis of open-ended survey responses, we aimed to identify ways in which GDY want to be supported by their parents or caregivers. Nine key themes were identified, including using affirming language at home and other settings as desired by GDY, seeking education, and aiding in accessing affirming items and care. Findings from this study can help pediatric medical and mental health providers help parents to support their GDY.

Keywords: adolescence; mental health; parenting; sexual/gender minorities and parenting; transgender

Introduction

Gender diverse youth (GDY), or those whose sex assigned at birth and gender identity do not fully align, are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and suicidality compared with cisgender peers.[1–3] Parental support of a young person's gender identity is associated with improved health outcomes and, in some cases, elimination of mental health inequities.[2,3] Few studies have examined the behaviors that GDY perceive as supportive of their gender identity[4,5] and even fewer have included gender diverse young people as part of the research team.[4]

Given the critical role of parent support in the mental health of GDY, this study partnered pediatric gender-affirming physicians (G.M.S. and K.M.K.) with gender diverse young people (O.B. and R.S.R.) to better understand what makes GDY feel supported by their parents.

Materials and Methods

Data collection

Adolescents (aged 12–17 years) receiving care at an urban pediatric gender clinic in an academic medical center in the northeastern United States were recruited to participate in an anonymous, online survey study about their experiences receiving gender-affirming care through telemedicine during the summer of 2020.[6]

Inclusion criteria for participation in the study included youth who selected transfemale/transfeminine, transmale/transmasculine, nonbinary, agender, genderqueer, or gender nonconforming when asked, "What is your gender identity? Please select all that apply," or if incongruence existed between their gender identity and sex assigned at birth (e.g., gender identity is female, but sex assigned at birth is male).

Participants were asked demographic questions as well as one open-ended question, "What could your parents/caregivers do to make you feel more supported in your gender identity?" They were also asked who the first person they came out to about their identity was, how long ago they came out to that first person, how long ago they came out to parents or caregivers, and to rate their most supportive parent or caregiver with regard to their gender identity on a scale from 1 (meaning not at all supportive) to 10 (meaning very supportive).

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This study was approved by the institutional review board (STUDY20040109) and a waiver of parental consent was granted, allowing youth to consent for themselves. Youth provided informed consent.

Data analysis

Demographic characteristics and items related to who they came out to and when and rating the support from parents and caregivers were analyzed using descriptive statistics in Stata 17 (StataCorp, College Station, TX, USA).

Responses to the open-ended survey item were analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis approach[7] after iterative review to develop a *de novo* codebook. Two authors (O.B. and K.M.K.) independently coded all responses and adjudicated all discrepancies with full agreement. These codes were then used to identify key themes. These themes were then reviewed by authors O.B. and R.S.R.

O.B. and R.S.R. used the data collected from youth participants as well as their own lived experience to expand on the themes and create guidance for parents and caregivers on how to support their GDY. All themes were validated with a community advisory board of GDY and parents of GDY to ensure data were interpreted within the context of community acceptability. This review resulted in small changes in the number, names, and order of themes.

Results

In total, 58 GDY completed the survey. The majority were white (95%), assigned female at birth (79%), and aged 16+ years (60%) (Table 1). Most first told another person about their gender identity within the last 3 years (65%) and the majority told a friend before anyone else (65%). When asked to rank the support received from their parents on a scale of 10 (with 10 being very supportive), participants selected an average of 8.24 (Table 2).

Nine unique themes were identified in the qualitative analysis and are described below, including illustrative quotes from participants.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

	n (%)
Gender identity[a]	
Female	7 (12)
Male	18 (33)
Transfemale/transfeminine	8(14)
Transmale/transmasculine	37 (64)
Nonbinary	5 (9)
Agender	2 (4)
Genderqueer	1 (2)
Gender nonconforming	5 (9)
Other	1 (2)
Prefer not to say	2 (4)
Sex assigned at birth	
Female	46 (79)
Male	12 (21)
Race/ethnicity[a]	
White	55 (95)
Black or African American	1 (2)
Hispanic or Latinx	5 (9)
Asian	2 (4)
American Indian or Alaska Native	1 (2)
Multiracial	4 (7)
Age (years)	
13	5 (9)
14	8 (14)
15	9 (16)
16	15 (26)
17	20 (34)

These demographics were previously published in a prior study.[6]
[a]Participants could select multiple responses.

Use the correct name, pronouns, and gendered language

"I would greatly appreciate it if they would use the name I identify with…" "Practice with my pronouns, use fewer compliments like 'beautiful' or 'pretty.'"
"Use my pronouns more."

The language you use to describe your child matters. Using their name and pronouns helps affirm their gender and signals that they have your support. The same is true for other gendered words, such as pretty or handsome, or when you refer to them as your son or daughter.

Using words that make them uncomfortable can leave a lasting negative impression regardless of intent. Making mistakes early on is expected. Practicing using your child's name and pronouns and correcting your mistakes show that you are making an effort to see them for who they are.

Respect your child's identity

"They could respect my identity."
"Don't talk about me in a kind of condescending way…"

Respect your child's identity as they define it. It may be difficult to think of them as your son/daughter/nonbinary child when you are used to viewing them differently, but your child is still the same person they have always been. Viewing them through the lens of their gender identity allows them to present a more authentic version of themselves to you and to the world.

Table 2. Coming Out and Perceived Support

	n (%)
First person the participant came out to	
Cisgender friend	26 (45)
GDY friend	12 (21)
Mother/stepmother	6 (10)
Sibling	5 (9)
Mental health provider	4 (7)
Father/stepfather	2 (3)
Other[a]	3 (5)
Time since first coming out	
<6 Months ago	3 (5)
Between 6 and 12 months ago	7 (12)
Between 1 and 2 years ago	12 (21)
Between 2 and 3 years ago	16 (28)
Between 4 and 5 years ago	14 (24)
Between 5 and 6 years ago	2 (3)
>6 Years ago	1 (2)
Unsure	3 (5)
Time since coming out to parents/caregivers	
<6 Months ago	6 (10)
Between 6 and 12 months ago	10 (17)
Between 1 and 2 years ago	16 (28)
Between 2 and 3 years ago	17 (29)
Between 4 and 5 years ago	6 (10)
Between 5 and 6 years ago	0 (0)
>6 Years ago	1 (2)
Unsure	2 (3)

Participant-perceived parent support	Mean	Standard deviation	Range
Score between 1 and 10[b]	8.24	1.87	3–10

[a]Other included both parents simultaneously, aunt, or significant other.
[b]Where 10 means very supportive and 1 means not at all supportive.
GDY, gender diverse youth.

Affirm your child's gender to others

"Advocate for me and gender me correctly more often around others."
"Not seem so ashamed of me being transgender."

With your child's permission, affirm their identity around others and advocate for them. This includes telling others what name and pronouns to use for your child; introducing them to people correctly; and using their chosen name, pronouns, and gendered language when talking with others. If friends or family use the wrong language, correct them.

This shows your child that you are not embarrassed by who they are and that their identity is more important than societal expectations or reactions. Notably, this should be done only after conversations with your child to ensure that they are ready for you to share their name, pronouns, and identity with others.

Support your child in accessing gender-affirming medical care

"Not try to put off me getting hormones for as long as possible…"
"Allow me to get period-blocking medicine."

Your child may express a desire to start medications (e.g., those that stop monthly bleeding or pause puberty), additional hormones (e.g., testosterone or estrogen), or surgeries (e.g., top surgery), and helping them access this care through providers knowledgeable in gender-related health is a very tangible way to show your support. Being informed and present while your child receives gender-affirming care can also help them navigate changes happening to and in their body.

Support your child's mental health

"…you're 'just not there yet' and leaving me to have suicidal thoughts daily…"
"…not talk about how much my going on hormones makes her upset in front of me…"

Your child's mental health may be negatively impacted by external factors such as stigma and discrimination or internal factors such as gender dysphoria. Bodies may change in ways that cause them distress, friends or family may not recognize their identity, and they may be forced to present to society in a way that is incongruent with their experienced identity. This may be further compounded by increasingly antitrans legislation efforts, particularly in the United States.[8]

Practice fostering an open communicative environment so that your child feels comfortable coming to you if they are struggling. Being vulnerable may be hard for your child, so listen and be empathetic when they talk about what they are experiencing. Even small bits of encouragement are reminders that you care about your child and can go a long way in motivating them to live as their authentic self.

Help your child access gender-affirming items

"They don't get why I want to wear heels and skirts sometimes…"
"Allow me to purchase binders [chest compression garments] …"
"I'm too awkward and scared to ask to get a packer, but I guess that could make me feel more supported…"

Changing how they externally present their gender can be stressful for your child and requires a lot of effort. They may get very nervous about whether or not they will be able to access gender-affirming items, if they are wearing gender-affirming items "correctly," or about what other people will think. Even though

they may want items such as a chest binder, makeup, or clothing that aligns more closely with their gender, they may be afraid to attain these gender-affirming items on their own.

Helping them buy or pick out these items not only allows them to present themselves to the world in an authentic way but it also tells them that embracing who they are is more important to you than society's expectations of them.

Let your child take the lead

"Trust me and believe that I know what I need."
"Let me control how I look…"
"Let me have the appointment by myself."

Only your child is able to experience their own gender and how it relates to their body and appearance. Giving them autonomy to express their external presentation, choose when and how they come out, and decide if/when they want to pursue a medical intervention under the care of a trained medical professional are good ways to build this trust.

Letting them take the lead may feel scary, but recognizing that they are cognizant of their own needs and identity both gives them room to grow and empowers them to advocate for what is best for them.

Get educated

"They do okay, but they aren't really educated that well…"
"Ask more questions and maybe do more research."
"Do more research."

The concepts and terminology that your child uses to talk about gender may be new to you. You can educate yourself by asking questions about unfamiliar concepts and doing research using credible sources to understand their experience as a gender diverse person in today's society.

Understanding what language to use when talking about gender, what gender-affirming items are commonly used by people with similar identities to your child, and what barriers the gender diverse community faces can open up new lines of communication. Knowing that you are willing to learn makes your child more comfortable expressing needs and thoughts with you. Additional resources for parents can be found in Table 3.[9–22]

Keep up the good effort

"I am happy with how kind and supportive both my parents are."

Table 3. Selected Resources for Parents of Gender Diverse Youth

Organizations	
Gender Spectrum	genderspectrum.org[9]
Human Rights Campaign	hrc.org[10]
PFLAG	pflag.org[11]
The Family Acceptance Project	familyproject.sfsu.edu[12]
The Trevor Project	thetrevorproject.org[13]
TransFamilies	transfamilies.org[14]
Trans Family Support Services	transfamilysos.org[15]
Books	
Found in Transition	Hassouri[16]
Gender Born, Gender Made: Raising Healthy Gender-Nonconforming Children	Ehrensaft[17]
Helping Your Transgender Teen: A Guide for Parents	Krieger[18]
The Sexual Spectrum: Why We're All Different	Skene Johnson[19]
Transgender Child: A Handbook for Families and Professionals	Brill and Pepper[20]
Trans Bodies, Trans Selves: A Resource by and for Transgender Communities	Erickson-Schroth[21]
Trans-Kin: A Guide for Family & Friends of Transgender People	Hubbard and Whitley[22]

"I'm thankful to say my mom is doing enough to make me feel fully supported."

Supporting your child in their journey with gender identity may be difficult. Even though your child's gender identity may be new to you, it is likely something they have been living with and thinking about for much longer. Mistakes are expected, but even when you mess up or are not sure what to do, the effort that you make to understanding and supporting your child makes them feel valued and secure. Listening, learning, and asking questions show them that you care.

Discussion

GDY report experiencing lower levels of parental support than their cisgender peers as well as disproportionately high rates of parental rejection of their identity.[23] Given the significant mental health inequities faced by GDY and the incredibly protective impact of parental support,[2,3] aiding parents in providing this support can be lifesaving. Participants in this study were actively receiving care through a pediatric gender clinic and endorsed a high level of perceived parental support on average, yet a minority first shared their gender identity with a parent.

This study adds to current literature focused on giving voice to the needs of GDY in clinical[24] and research[25] spaces by expanding our understanding of what support looks like for this population of young people. Some themes identified were similar to

prior research,[24] including the importance of names, pronouns, and other gendered language and the importance of accessing gender-affirming care.

Other themes, including a desire to have parents affirming a young person's identity to others and the gratitude expressed by young people who acknowledged how much support they have received, have not been as well explored and should inform future research on GDY perception of support.

Limitations

This study is limited, in that the qualitative responses from GDY were from a single geographic region and may not reflect the experiences of all GDY, particularly black, brown, and indigenous GDY; those assigned male at birth; those with lower perceived parental support; and those unable to access care through a pediatric gender clinic. Additionally, the majority of GDY in this study noted being out to their parents for over a year. GDY who have come out more recently may have different support needs.

Future studies should seek to understand the support needs of all GDY, but particularly GDY of color, those assigned male at birth, those who have come out more recently than those in this sample, and those who have not established rapport with a pediatric gender provider.

Conclusions

We identified nine ways that parents can help their young person feel supported. Results from this study may serve as a guide for pediatric providers to center conversations about the importance and practical applications of parental support for GDY.

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Authors' Contributions

O.B. was involved in conceptualization, methodology, validation, formal analysis, writing—original draft, writing—review and editing, and visualization. G.M.S. was involved in methodology and writing—review and editing. R.S.R. was involved in validation and writing—review and editing. K.M.K. was involved in conceptualization, methodology, software, validation, formal analysis, investigation, writing—review and editing, visualization, and supervision.

Disclaimer

This work is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health. The National Institutes of Health was not involved in the study design, the writing of the protocol, or the decision to submit for publication.

Author Disclosure Statement

No competing financial interests exist.

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Abbreviation Used

GDY = gender diverse youth